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Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich
ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-57800>
Scientific Publication in Electronic Form
Published Version

Originally published at:

Canella, C (2011). Experiencing the city by walking. Basel: Mobile Culture Studies.

Experiencing the city by walking

by Claudia Canella

Abstract

In urban space, the movement of walking stands for realising the dynamic of culture as an everyday process. The paper relates to the relevant question about this process in the field of Cultural Studies by exploring in an empirical-qualitative way how three women experience the city of Zurich by their everyday walking.

The presented findings are based on fieldwork. Two categories analytically extracted from the empirical data are focused on, namely: "experiences and functions of walking" and "denotation and description of the routes covered by walking".

Keywords: urban space; social space; mobility; everyday walking; the city as a realm of individual experience; relation between women and the urban space; empirical, qualitative case study

"Marcher, c'est mettre la ville en emploi du temps vécu."

(Jean-François Augoyard)

"Walking means bringing the city into the service of lived time"¹, gets Jean-François Augoyard², the pioneering French urbanist, to the heart of the importance of walking in the urban space. In my master thesis³, I put my own empirical flesh on this quotation-bone exploring in an empirical-qualitative way how three women experience the city of Zurich by their everyday walking.

In urban space, the movement of walking stands for realising the dynamic of culture as an everyday process⁴. With my research I'm relating to the relevant question about this process in the field of Cultural Studies.

The paper presents the most important results of my research. The findings will be illustrated on the basis of the fieldwork and then interpreted. I will focus on the two most essential categories⁵, which resulted from the empirical data, namely: "experiences and functions of walking" and "denotation and description of the routes covered by walking".

Theoretical background

Today, the city is part of everyday life for an increasing number of people. The significance of Cultural Studies engaged with the city is to explore people's perceptions, constructions and everyday practices of and in the urban space understood as social space. The concept of social space can be traced back to Emile Durckheim (1857-1917), one of the first who considered space as a basic category of human thought and communication⁶. His ideas on social space were subsequently refined by Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) in his book on "the production of space" published in 1974⁷. Lefebvre defines social space as at the same time formed by socialization and as a factor of socialization, in other words as "condition and result of social action"⁸. One method of approaching the description of social action is to understand the perspective of the individual. With respect to the city, this means describing how the city dweller appropriates the city by perceiving, thinking, acting and interacting.

The concept of space, which emanates from the individuals in their relation to the outer world, has its roots in phenomenology where it is postulated that the *relation* between men and physical space constitutes space⁹. From the perspective of Cultural Studies, we must therefore ask about the cultural exposure to space¹⁰ which is an active process of appropriation. In sum, that is why we can speak of the city as an individual realm of experience¹¹.

The relation between the individual and the world expresses itself in directed human action which is always oriented towards a goal and becomes explicitly visible in everyday movement¹². Walking – also as a gender specific body technique and experience¹³ – is the most immediate nature of human movement. Moreover, it can be considered as characteristic for a city and especially for the female city dweller¹⁴. In conclusion, walking means realising everyday urban life; walking constitutes urban space in experiencing it and interacting with it¹⁵.

Scientific objectives, research questions and data collection

In my research, I asked which routes women draw by walking in Zurich, what they report about their walking and how do they perform it. The focus was on the relation between the women and the urban space; in this connection, I focused especially on the women's own perception and narrative construction of this relation.

The three informant women were chosen after the principles of the qualitative case study¹⁶ representing presumed ideal types i.e. adult women who live, work and regularly walk in Zurich and who differs in lifestyle. The collection of the data proceeded in three stages using the principle of triangulation. In the first stage, the three women took minutes of their everyday routes and experiences of walking in Zurich during four days. In the second stage, I talked with each of them about their journal in a guided interview and we choose one of their routes. In the third stage, I joined them on the selected route in a commented walk¹⁷.

The following analysis, which included transcribing, coding and case study report writing, revealed: which urban routes the surveyed women walked; what functions they had for them; when the women chose walking as a transportation mode; how the women described their routes; what they knew about urban space; how they navigated

in it and how they assessed it; what they perceived, thought and felt during walking; and finally, how they talked about these topics.

The three informant women¹⁸

I will primarily report on Joan (69)¹⁹ whose experiences are especially illustrative of the two categories in question. She is a pensioner and lives in second marriage with James. Before her retirement, Joan worked for the ecclesiastical council of Zurich as a youth and social worker. For many years, she was a mother and housewife. Joan has been living in Zurich since her birth, predominantly in the urban district of Albisrieden.

Sara (42) is married as well. She suffers from multiple sclerosis which developed during her master degree in biology. After this, Sara started to play music intensively and today she is a pianist. For her academic studies, Sara came from Central Switzerland to Zurich. Since then she has been living in Zurich.

The third woman is Gaia (38). She is married and has three children at pre-school age. Currently, Gaia is working on her habilitation thesis in history. Gaia has grown up overseas and came to Zurich at the age of 9. Since then, she has been living in Zurich; at present, in the inner city.

Experiences and functions of walking

Walking is related to specific experiences and fulfils certain functions for all the three women. Concerning Joan, they can be summarised as follows: "To go exploring" and "observing nature perceptively".

Joan: To go exploring

Joan chooses her routes in such a way as to experience as much as possible whilst walking. She describes this way of making experiences during walking as "to go exploring". Precisely, it is an open and attentive attitude, which Joan deliberately takes up towards her everyday environment. She explains that we should be happy with what we have got and that we should create something out of that:

"Although I know them all a bit, these little routes, they are like short voyages of discovery: let us have look, if I go this way what will I see there? (...) You may simply ask what is it that you can discover here? However, HERE you can as well, you know, behind this corner I can discover something new, (...). So, you have to be happy with what you have got, (...) you have just to make something out of that now (...)"²⁰.

Whenever possible, Joan chooses alternative stretches on her everyday routes or, for instance, she goes shopping in various places in order to experience variety. She walks more often the routes that serve the desired experiences up to her, while she avoids routes which offer her little or no experiences such as the path to the shop next to her house.

Joan: Observing nature perceptively

Joan's needs for well-being, enjoyment and voyages of discovery converge in observing nature. Consequently, she chooses routes which lead her through green spaces such as allotments or parks as often as possible.

Joan puts the open and attentive attitude towards her everyday environment into practice by observing nature, primarily by observing flowers. She names this personal attitude "attentiveness"²¹ or "mindfulness"²² and refers to it in the 'Buddhist sense' and associates it with the characteristics of "being curious"²³ and with the need for "discovering things"²⁴. Joan puts the habit of looking at flowers down to her childhood and identifies it as typical of her. She tries to grasp the flowers with all her senses: she observes them growing and wilting through the seasons, she smells, touches and feels them. Doing this creates an emotion of "dwelling on"²⁵ in the way Joan treasured the memory of her childhood. She interprets this association as "longing for childhood" and values it as a "gift".

Sara: Walking for health

Sara primarily walks for reasons of health, a function that commands her walking and all of her routes. She says of herself being a "couch potato"²⁶ and not having a natural penchant for walking²⁷. Consequently, she always needs a goal such as going shopping or meeting people. Therewith, she outsmarts herself walking and moving. Today, she values walking more than ever because she is able to "boundlessly"²⁸ walk unlike ten years ago when she managed only two hundred meters at once.

Gaia: Walking between the everyday family spots

Gaia normally walks all of her everyday routes. They connect the scenes of her family life. Gaia's walking is characterised by the organisation of the family life and the shared time with her children. The dominating subject is which child is going to stay where and by whom and how it will be escorted. The children have a stable daily structure with specified appointments and locations. As a result, Gaia walks well mapped-out within a fixed timeframe which does not allow much flexibility. Furthermore, she is fully concentrated on her children during walking. They talk about their day or other experiences they have made. The immediate surrounding is rarely the subject of their talks; but walking offers mother and children space and time of being together.

Individual experience of space – constituting space

The "experiences and functions of walking" is the category which expresses the relation between the women and the urban space. Therefore, it is an essential category in the process of constituting space as portrayed in the following.

Oriented action puts function and goal of a route and creates path and space. However, this is not a sufficient description of walking and the experience of urban space it creates. The different experiences of the women rather show that it is not only about reaching a goal but also about the women as individuals and their everyday life; how they exploit space to themselves by actively perceiving, thinking and acting during walking²⁹. By walking, the women express themselves in their characteristics, experi-

ences, memories and by their current actions. This is what Otto Friedrich Bollnow relating to Kurt Lewin and Jean-Paul Sartre means when speaking of "hodological space", which is the spatial expression of "the inner draft of the relation with the outer world"³⁰. The understanding of the city as "space of individual experience" is based on this hodological concept of space³¹. Emphasising space as individual experience conveys that it is the relation between the individual and space which really constitutes space³². Bollnow consequently concludes that the "spatiality of human life and the experienced space by man" correspond to each other "in strong correlation"³³. The experiences of the three women show this individual relation, the experienced and lived urban space by perceiving, thinking and acting.

Denotation and description of the routes covered by walking

Although the three women differently experience their walking, their way of denoting and describing their routes is almost identical. It can be represented by five categories which are not mutually exclusive but rather used to complete each other by the women.

1. The women use "*official names*" such as street names, names of buildings or rivers.
2. They refer to "*functions*" i. e. functions of places or functions which are performed by people at these places. Joan often uses them in her telling. For instance, she speaks of the "*care centre*"³⁴ or the "*school building*". Describing one of her strolls, Sara explained that she and her husband came along the "*shooting range*" or Gaia tells me of her route to the "*kindergarten*" of her daughter.
3. The women assign typical "*qualities*" to places and paths. For example, Joan assigns the qualities "*meadow*" and "*beautiful old trees*" to the "Triemli-Path" or Sara describes the "Wehntaler-Street" as "*uninviting*"³⁵ and "*hectic*".
4. The women refer to "*topographic conditions*" while describing their routes. At a certain point of our conversation, for example, Joan says that she prefers going a little "*up*" although it would be nearer "*down there*"³⁶. In her report, Gaia notes that she went with her mother to the supermarket "*down the Bahnhof-Street*" or Sara once tells me that her way home leads her "*up there*" along the edge of the forest in the summer.
5. The fifth category consists of "*what can be pointed at while speaking*". During the interview, for instance, Joan points out of the window and explains: "I attend the aqua fit just *over there*"³⁷. In the same way, Sara describes that her hairdresser is "*up there*" or during our commented walk, Gaia points at a new coffee shop and explains that she walks past "*here*" from time to time.

Gaia's description of a part of her route to work is a good example of combining these categories in order to explain a specific route: Gaia explains that from the "*kindergarten*" she walks past her "*house*", and then she goes "*up the Spiegelgasse*" and walks past the "ZunftHaus zur Zimmerleuten". The "*Spiegelgasse*" and the "ZunftHaus zur Zimmerleuten" are "*official names*" denoting a street and a restaurant. "*Kindergarten*" and "*house*" refer to the function of these places and the going "*up the Spiegelgasse*" indicates a "*topographic condition*".

Cultural exposure to urban space

Augoyard provides a possible explanation of the just mentioned uniform ways of description: A speaker describes his route in a way which offers to the audience the possibility of identifying the places which the speaker referred to. Thus, places and routes are denoted by names or categories which are available in a common discourse³⁸. We need a common language to come to a shared understanding about our individual experiences. Therefore, I hypothesise the category "denotation and description of the routes covered by walking" being a result of a common agreement on movement and orientation in urban space. It is an essential category which describes a cultural exposure to urban space being part of the social discourse.

Conclusion: The interaction between the individual experience of space and the culturally rooted experience of space

Concerning the category "experiences and functions of walking", I concluded that it expresses the relation between the three women and the urban space. It is an essential category for the process of constituting space. I further demonstrated that the category "denotation and description of the routes covered by walking" is a result of a common agreement on movement and orientation in urban space. Thus, this category describes a cultural exposure to urban space directly.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the interplay between individually and culturally rooted experiences of space while walking in the city can be empirically reconstructed along these two categories. Thereby, the category "experiences and functions of walking" describes the individual experience of urban space, whereas the category "denotation and description of the routes covered by walking" shows the culturally rooted experience of space.

When describing their walking in the urban space, the three women use both of the categories simultaneously. This usage can be understood as an example of the persistent interaction between the individual and the society – an interaction we call culture.

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Notes

¹ Translated in English by the author.

² Augoyard (2001): *La conduite de récit*, 178.

³ Canella (2009): *Erfahrungsraum Stadt*.

⁴ <http://www.mobileculturestudies.com/welcome.html> (01.11.2010).

⁵ Thereby, one category is a combination of two single codes which relate to each other with regard to their meaning of experiencing the city by walking: (1) "Experiences of walking" is combined with "functions of walking"; (2) "Denotation of the routes" with "descriptions of the routes".

⁶ Rolshoven, Johanna (2003 a): *Von der Kulturraum- zur Raumkulturforschung*, 198.

⁷ Lefebvre, Henri (2000): *La production de l'espace*.

⁸ Rolshoven, Johanna (2003 a): *Von der Kulturraum- zur Raumkulturforschung*, 197–200.

⁹ Bollnow, Otto Friedrich (1963): *Mensch und Raum*, 23–24; De Certeau, Michel (1988): *Kunst des Handelns*, 218; Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1966): *Phänomenologie der Wahrnehmung*, 294; Rolshoven, Johanna (2003 a): *Von der Kulturraum- zur Raumkulturforschung*, 3.

¹⁰ Hengartner, Thomas (1999): *Forschungsfeld Stadt*, 273.

¹¹ Bollnow, Otto Friedrich (1963): *Mensch und Raum*, 195–202; Rolshoven, Johanna (2003 a): *Von der Kulturraum- zur Raumkulturforschung*, 197; Rolshoven, Johanna (2003 b): *Der Rand des Raumes*, 9.

¹² Bollnow, Otto Friedrich (1963): *Mensch und Raum*; Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1966): *Phänomenologie der Wahrnehmung*, 329.

¹³ Butler, Judith (2004): *Undoing Gender*; Rolshoven, Johanna (2001): *Gehen in der Stadt*, 26.

¹⁴ <http://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/de/index.Document.91826.pdf> (18.05.07).

Thus, I decided to focus on women at the beginning of my research. Thereby, I had in mind to empirically describe the female dimension of experiencing the city by walking. At the end, this intention turned out not to be as convincing as the other aspects of experience such as the ones described in this paper.

¹⁵ Augoyard (2001): *La conduite de récit*, 179; De Certeau, Michel (1988): *Kunst des Handelns*, 188.

¹⁶ Lamnek, Siegfried (1995): *Qualitative Sozialforschung*, 22; Yin, Robert K. (2003): *Case study research*.

¹⁷ Thibaud, Jean-Paul (2001): *La méthode des parcours commentés*; Winkler, Justin (2003): *Working on the experience of passing environments: on commented walks*.

¹⁸ I would like to sincerely thank Joan, Sara und Gaia for their participation, openness und engagement!

¹⁹ Names of participants have been changed, age at 2011.

²⁰ Original passage: "Obwohl ich alle ein bisschen kenne, diese kleinen Wege, sind sie wie kleine Entdeckungsreisen: mal schauen, wenn ich jetzt dort durch gehe, was sehe ich jetzt dort. (...). Einfach, du kannst sagen, ja was kannst du hier schon entdecken, aber (...) du kannst eben auch HIER, oder, kann ich hier hinter dieser Ecke hinten, etwas Neues entdecken, (...). So mit dem auch zufrieden sein, (...) mit dem musst du jetzt halt etwas machen (...)."

²¹ Original wording: "Aufmerksamkeit".

²² Original wording: "Achtsamkeit".

²³ Original wording: "Neugierig sein".

²⁴ Original wording: "Sachen entdecken".

²⁵ Original wording: "Verweilen".

²⁶ Original wording: "Bewegungsmuffel".

²⁷ Original passage: Zu-Fuss-Gehen sei in ihrer "Persönlichkeit" nicht angelegt.

²⁸ Original wording: "Unbeschränkt".

²⁹ Rolshoven (2003): *Von der Kulturraum- zur Raumkulturforschung*, 197.

³⁰ Bollnow (1963): *Mensch und Raum*, 195–212 (Quotation translated in English by the author).

³¹ Rolshoven (2001): *Gehen in der Stadt*, 24.

³² Bollnow (1963): *Mensch und Raum*, 23; Merleau-Ponty (1966): *Phänomenologie der Wahrnehmung*, 329.

³³ Bollnow (1963): *Mensch und Raum*, 24 (Quotations translated in English by the author); see also: Merleau-Ponty (1966): *Phänomenologie der Wahrnehmung*, 294.

³⁴ Original wording: "Pflegezentrum".

³⁵ Original wording: "Nicht gerade lauschig".

³⁶ Original wording: "Unten durch".

³⁷ Original passage: "Ins Aquafit gehe ich da vorne".

³⁸ Augoyard (2001): La conduite de récit, 192–193.

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